

## What We are Now by morning\_fangirl

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Bisexual Will Byers (background), F/M, Future Fic, Ignoring S4 teaser, Multiple chapters, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Parent-Child Relationship, Post Season 3, Secret Child

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Original Characters, Original Child Character(s), Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler (past), Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler/Original Female Character(s)

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2020-02-21

**Updated:** 2021-03-19

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 13:35:48

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 8

**Words:** 18,123

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

Nine years after Will was taken by the Demogorgan the party has remained close. That is until El leaves without notice the day before they all leave for their junior year in college.

Fast-forward another fifteen years. No one has heard from their mage since she left. The rest of the party has grown up and moved on with their lives. One day by chance Max finds something or rather someone that brings El, or rather Jane, back to her family. Only turns out she ran with a really big secret all those years ago.

## 1. Shocking Truth... 15 Years Late (may '07)

### Summary for the Chapter:

Max meets a little girl who looks oddly familiar. Not to mention she shares the name of someone from her past.

Turns out Mike has missed a lot and he consented to none of it.

**MAY 2007**

“Is Peter napping?”

“Yep.”

“Are Nadia and Olivia here?”

Lucas looks up from his paperwork taking his reading glasses from his nose. “What happened to being an involved parent who knows where their children are?” His teasing smirk is met with a strong glare from his wife. He clears his throat, “Um, no... they’re not here.”

“Where are they?” Max asks, one eyebrow arched.

“Oh... uh, you see they each came in and dropped their bags after school... Then, they called out that they were going somewhere with somebody and ran out.”

“We can address that issue later,” Max says, her hands coming together to pinch her nose before forcefully gesturing. “But first there’s something we need to talk about.”

“That phrase never leads anywhere good.”

“So, you know how I had that PTA meeting today?”

“Yeah,” Lucas snickers causing Max to level another glare at her

husband. "What? I don't know when I'll get over the fact that you're one of the PTA moms."

"Well, *our* kids have been in school for seven years and we've been married for fourteen, so I'd think about that," she says with a fake smile that immediately causes her husband to sober up. "Anyway, there was this kid."

"At the school? Really? That's truly shocking."

A huff. "Just listen for a sec, would you?" Lucas motions his concession.

"So there was this kid, a girl, who was thirteen or maybe fourteen--"

"At a middle school?"

Max raises a single eyebrow cutting her husband off, and then proceeds as if she hadn't been interrupted. "Anyway, you know how we always say the Wheeler genes are strong when we look at Molly... like we say that they're stronger in Tristan and Ryan, but think about Molly."

Completely lost Lucas nods along.

"This girl, she looks so much like Molly. Like, just how she should look when she's a teenager. Same unruly black hair. Same build that comes from Nancy. And just like how Molly's two features from her mom are her eye color and nose... Those were the two things that were different."

"So, what? You're saying you saw some love child Mike had that he probably doesn't even know exists."

"The eyes... I hadn't seen eyes like that since the last time I saw El."

"You think El pulled away from everyone because Mike got her pregnant?"

Max runs her hand through her hair. "Now I do." It's not a whisper. It's not a scream.

“Jesus,” Lucas breaths out. “Was there anything, I don’t know... more conclusive?”

“More conclusive! She looked just like you would expect the love child of Mike and El to look!”

“Please tell me you’re not planning on telling Mike before you have some more evidence because this could be a really weird coincidence.”

“She looked just like the perfect mixture of the two of them and her last name was Hopper! That seems pretty conclusive to me.”

“Max?”

“Yeah?”

“That is the first time you mentioned you knew the last name.”

“Oh... opps?”

Lucas sighs, “We have to call him then. I mean if you will be able to find her again. If you won’t be able to find her again, we shouldn’t tell him.”

An eye roll she had patented by the end of eighth grade. “Of course I can find her. Phone numbers and addresses of all students are in the school *directory* , stalker.”

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“Hello? You’ve reached Mike Wheeler.”

“Don’t you have caller ID, Wheeler?”

“It’s called phone etiquette *Maxine* . Why do you choose to bother me on this fine day?”

“To ruin your life.”

“What?”

“You have an illegitimate daughter, a love child if you will.”

“Oh, right. And how did you know about this before me?” If Max can’t hear the eye-roll in his voice, he has been underestimating her for years.

“Well, she’s fourteen and goes to the same middle school as Nadia.”

“Wait... this isn’t some sick joke Mayfield?” He could have sworn this was some stupid opener to something; he’s stunned that this is the actually point of the call.

“No, Wheeler, it’s not. Not to mention, it’s been Sinclair for fourteen years. Anyway, that’s not the point. Her name is Terra Hopper and she looks so much like Molly. It’s crazy.”

“Hopper... haven’t heard that name in fifteen years. So, it’s El--Jane’s--kid?”

“You have to ask?! What were you doing fifteen years ago, Micheal?”

“I’ve only slept with two people, not that it’s any of your business. I just never thought I’d hear anything from Jane again. I’m a bit shocked.”

“Well, I guess congratulations, Wheeler. I’m texting you the number they had on file for her. Talk to you later.”

There’s a click and the call disconnects, yet Mike doesn’t move. He’s frozen, shell-shocked from the news. E--Jane walked out of his life fifteen years ago and he had moved on with his life. At the time it seemed like the world was ending. In his head it was always him and her. Then, she left shattering that fantasy. A couple years later, he met Alex and for the first time since she had left he felt truly happy.

Now, he finds out, not only did she leave him, but Hopper also took his kid away from him. Wow. He’s going to have to tell his wife, his amazing wonderful wife, that apparently he has a fourteen-year-old daughter he had no idea about. The only thing that will make it bearable is the fact that she’s been alive longer than he and Alex have

known each other.

It's the small things that change your life. The single sentences that change everything. He and Alex had decided three kids was enough... turns out they were due a fourth in a way.

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"Hi, are you Terra Hopper?" The unknown woman speaking to her has bright red hair and looks to be about her mother's age. Terra crosses her arms as she looks over the woman--big purse, a mom purse, messy hair, flannel shirt--who seems non-threatening.

A single eyebrow raised, Terra asks back: "Why do you want to know?"

"Because I think I may know your father."

Reality in a way popped. To Terra it has always been her and her mom against the world. She had always known that her dad didn't know she existed... okay always is a bit of an exaggeration. She didn't question not having a dad until kindergarten when she saw all the other kids with their dads. She didn't really understand what her mom meant by the fact that her dad didn't know she existed. She did now. She probably got her 'birds and the bees' talk earlier than most kids. Wait. She had a point. Right. Anyway, she never thought her biological dad would be in the picture maybe a step-dad (she had an inkling that her mom's current boyfriend might propose), and now some stranger was telling her that she knows her dad.

"I...I know this may be a shock," the woman starts. Shoot, she must have gone shock silent.

"Sorry," she took a shaky breath, "this is just... I don't even know you and here you come, out of nowhere might I add, saying you know my dad, who I never thought I would meet and know very little about--"

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done this. I haven't even introduced

myself. I'm Max, and I knew your mom as a teenager. I heard your name the other day when I was up here for PTA. And god, you are the perfect blend of your parents. I just knew you were theirs."

"You're from Hawkins?"

"Not originally, but yeah. When I moved there, I became friends with Mike Wheeler and your mom."

"Is that my dad's name?" Wow. She was fourteen years old and had never heard her dad's name before today.

"How about this," Terra can see the mischief in Max's eyes, "there's a coffee shop around the corner. As long as you're not expected home, we can go and talk?"

"I... I'd like that."

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"So, you're my dad?" Her voice is oh so small.

"Yeah, kid. I'm uh sorry I've missed so much. I just found out you existed. Your mom went MIA when she got pregnant with you."

"I know. She always made it clear that my dad had no idea I existed." She gave a bitter humorless laugh, "She didn't even tell me your name, Max did."

Mike was trying to not let that bother him, at least not right now. "So, anything you wanna know?"

"Well, if you don't mind, I'd like to tackle the present before the past. What's your life like?"

"I have three kids, so you have three half-siblings. Molly, she's the oldest, just turned seven. Then, there's Tristan who's four, but going to be five by the end of the year. And Ryan's the youngest at eleven months. In September, I'll have been married nine years to my wife, Alex."

"In other words, your friend accidentally finding me is ruining your perfect little family."

"No. I don't want you to think that... This isn't exactly what I expected, but I don't want you to think you're ruining anything."

"You don't live here, so where do you live?"

"Oh, I live in the suburbs outside Cincinnati."

"Ohio?"

"Yeah," her *dad* chuckled.

"Okay, let me guess at the end of the cul-de-sac."

Another laugh, "You sound like my sister, Nancy."

"Tell me about the rest of your family... or I guess my family..."

"Well, I'm a middle child in between two girls. My older sister's Nancy; she's a journalist at the Chicago Sun Times. She has two kids, so you have two cousins. Christopher's almost eighteen and Catherine's going to be ten next month. And um... Nancy's, she's divorced. My younger sister, Holly, is twenty-six and getting married at the end of the summer. Then, my parents are your average middle-class American family who look like the perfect family from the outside, but from the inside you question if they ever loved each other."

"How long have they been married?"

"Forty-two years."

"Well, there must have been something between them to keep them together that long... So, you came from the perfect American family and had the perfect American family. I feel like I'm really intruding on something."

Mike sighs, "Tell me about yourself."

"Do I have to? I mean I'm not going to get over you not being here



immediately.”

“Hey, I had no idea, okay? Your mom took off without a trace. I feel like we went through this at the beginning. Not to mention, it takes two.”

“There’s also this thing called protection.”

“One: are you seriously saying you wish your parents had used protection and you hadn’t been born? And two: Condoms are only 97% effective. I would remember that if I were you.”

“Where’d you get that fact? ‘F.R.I.E.N.D.S?’”

“Look... I know I haven’t been there, but that wasn’t my choice. I want to be here now... I would have been there before, so can you tell me a little about yourself?”

Terra looks conflicted. The two of them sit in silence for a minute before she finally sighs. “Well, I’m fourteen. My birthday’s April 27. My full name is Terra Sarah Hopper. As far as I knew before today, I was an only child. I’ve been raised by my mom, Jane Hopper. The only other family I knew was my mom’s aunt. Um... all I know about my mom’s life before me is that she had been adopted twice. Her dad died when she was fourteen; she took his last name, but she was only legally his daughter for around eight months. She lived with her second family, a mom and two brothers until college.”

“That’s a good start.” Mike got a bit of a goofy smile on his face. “Did your mom ever tell you that we met in the woods when we were twelve?” Terra shakes her head. “Yeah. We started dating a year later at thirteen until she dumped my ass. Then, she... uh moved away. We thought about being long distance, but instead we were kind of just make-out buddies during school breaks for the rest of high school. Then, we started dating again in college.”

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“Hi, Jane.”

Her eyes are wide as she takes in the body of her ex-boyfriend. The last fifteen years have definitely been good to him. "Mike," she says breathlessly.

"I think we need to talk," he says no nonsense.

"I haven't seen you in fifteen years. What do we have to talk about?"

"Our fourteen-year-old daughter, Terra Sarah Hopper, and the fact that you didn't tell me, didn't give me a choice."

"How did... I think you should come in... So... how have you been?"  
Eleven tries.

"No. We're not doing small talk crap, Jane. We are going to cut the crap and get to the point here."

"How did you find out?"

"Max called me."

"But the last time I saw Max was the last time I saw you."

"Yeah, well, she saw Terra when she was at a PTA meeting. She saw the resemblance and heard the last name and called me up. I've already met my daughter by the way."

"Oh."

"I'm here because I'm not missing anymore of her life."

"Where do you live?"

"Cincinnati with my wife and three kids."

"So, you moved on."

"Yes, I moved on. You left without explanation when we were twenty-one. I met someone else and started a family."

"How's everyone else?"

"None of your business. You know why? Because you left all of us

without any explanation. We would have helped you, Jane,” Mike is shouting now but he couldn’t care. “But you know what? As much as I hate that I missed out on Terra’s life, missed her first fourteen years of her life, I am glad you left. If it weren’t for you selfishly leaving everyone in your life, all the people who cared about you without a trace, I wouldn’t have my amazing life!”

Jane was shocked into speechlessness. Before she can truly process what her ex-boyfriend, father of her daughter is saying, he’s talking again.

“So, Jane listen. Either we work something out so that I can get to know my daughter, or I am prepared to take this to court and get visitation the hard way. Terra has my number when you decide.”

And just like that, Micheal Wheeler was gone.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

If you like having details like me:

Main Setting: Chicago-surrounding suburbs

Relationships thus far:

Mike/Jane (past-'childhood' relationship): Terra Sara Hopper, born April 27, 1993 (14 at start)

Mike and Alex: Married on September 26, 1998. Molly, born May 4, 2000 (7 at start). Tristan, born November 8, 2002 (4 at start). Ryan, born June 16, 2006 (11 m at start).

Max and Lucas (1971): Married 1993. Nadia, born December 14, 1994(12 at the start). Olivia, born March 28, 1998 (9 at the start). Parker, born February 7, 2007 (3 m at start).

## **2. Meet the family (june '07)**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

Terra is getting to spend a couple weeks at her dad's house. While she's there, Mike's youngest turns one which means the entire family comes over (and yes that includes all of our upside down survivors).

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Fun little nods in the form of Terra's party outfit ; )

### **JUNE 2007**

The last month has been spent figuring out this new normal. There had only been a month left in the school year when everything “came to light,” you could say, which complicated finishing middle school a little bit. Besides my dad, I haven’t met any of my family. The two of us mostly talk on the phone or videoconference, but I have seen him when he was in town for work.

School let out Thursday, and I can’t say I’m not absolutely thrilled. Good riddance to waking up at six am in order to listen to teachers drone on about topics I have no interest in and other kids who make me want to scream.

Two days of summer have come and gone as I try to pack for my couple weeks in Ohio this fine Sunday. I’m going to stay with my dad which means meeting my siblings... okay well half siblings but still. I feel bad about you know, kind of dropping in and completely disrupting their lives. It’s bad enough I dropped into my dad’s life, but I keep thinking of his wife, Alex, my step-mom. She married someone, started a life that has three kids, and here I come ruining picture perfect suburbia...

“Terra!” I look up and see my dad waving with a little girl who must be Molly on his back lollipop sticking out of her mouth.

“Hey, Mike.” I haven’t gotten to calling my dad ‘dad’. No matter who lied at fault I was still a fourteen-year-old, I wasn’t going to call someone who hadn’t been in my life ‘dad’ overnight.

“Molly, this is your sister Terra who I’ve been telling you about,” Mike says as he sets Molly down. “Terra, this is Molly.”

Molly winkles her nose at me cocking her head to the side. “So,” she starts dragging out the ‘o’, “you’re the reason I’m no longer the oldest?”

I’m not really sure if she meant it as a statement or a question. Rocking back and forth awkwardly, because wow this is awkward, I clear my throat and try to smile. “Yeah, I guess so.”

To my immense surprise, my little sister (oh my god I have a little sister and I am meeting her and dang she’s seven years of cuteness) grins, “Cool. Being the oldest is a lot of responsibility and I am over it.”

Laughing and genuinely smiling, I respond, “Well, I’m happy to take that ‘responsibility’ from you.”

This responsibility must include listening with seeming interest at whatever the younger sibling says because Molly starts talking a mile per minute. She has since gotten down from Mike’s back and started bouncing around as we walk to the car. Despite my protests, Mike has taken my checked bag from me.

As I listen, I can honestly barely keep up with the words coming out of Molly’s mouth. I am (very) quickly coming to learn that my little sister is much more extroverted and outgoing than I have ever been. My dad shoots me an apologetic look, but I give him an “it’s okay” sign. Even though I’m not one hundred percent sure what is happening with Molly, it’s making me happy. She accepts me! Maybe, just maybe, this new normal won’t be as hard as I thought.

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“This is your room. It was the guest room... and I mean it still will be, but you and Alex can go out tomorrow so that you can make it your own. I want you to make it your own. I mean I hope you’ll come and visit when you have breaks and stuff, and I want you to feel at home.”

I turn smiling and give my dad a hug which I think surprises him. “Thank you,” I whisper, “this means a lot to me.”

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When I wake up on June 14th, it’s to a blaring alarm. Why is there an alarm going off? Oh right, Ryan’s first birthday party. His birthday isn’t until Monday, but it’s easier to have a party on the weekend. It’s only going to be family at the party; however, that includes basically family friends which my dad has a lot of apparently.

As I sit up in bed, I take a deep breath. I’m going to meet the rest of my family and everyone important to my dad. I think at one point these people were important to my mom too, but well I wouldn’t know... I may just find out though.

I head downstairs clad in my Nike shorts and a field day t-shirt from this past school year. Ryan’s in his highchair at the table with Cheerios spread out in front of him while Molly and Tristan sit at the table holding sippy cups of oj (I’ve learned Alex still has her seven year old daughter drink out of a sippy cup for a very good reason). I myself go and pour myself coffee. This action has Alex raising an eyebrow at me as she flips a pancake.

“I had to get up at 7:30 during my summer break for a first birthday party where I’m going to meet my entire extended family. I **deserve**

this,” I say, trying to leave no room for argument. Alex gives a ‘what the hell, go ahead’ gesture, so I grab creamer and whipped cream before settling in at the table next to Molly who promptly begins talking.

“Terra, Grandma and Grandpa and Nana and Poppa are coming today!”

“I know Molly,” I barely suppress the laughter at the childhood excitement.

“Who else is coming Miss Molly?” my dad says coming into the kitchen.

“Uncle Steve! And Robin and Uncle Will and like everyone, Daddy,” Molly practically shouts, a grin stretched across her face.

“Molly, sweetheart, inside voice,” Alex tells her daughter as she brings in the pancakes.

Seeing the pancakes, Tristan stands in his seat to reach for one; Alex beats him to it handing him a plastic plate with two pancakes. The four-year-old promptly begins to happily eat his breakfast.

While I start to eat my own breakfast, I turn to my dad and ask, “So, how many people are there going to be?”

“Uh let’s see,” he starts, “grandparents make four. My two sisters and Alex’s sister, Sam, make three which is seven. Then, there are Jon and Nick. Is Sam bringing her boyfriend?” Alex shakes her head ‘no’. “So, nine. Chris and Cat are eleven. Steve’s coming alone and so are Robin and Erica, fourteen. The Sinclairs are nineteen. And I think that just leaves Dustin, Carrie, Elijah, Will, and Brooke to round us out to twenty-four?”

“You forgot Joyce and Murray,” Alex says.

My dad nods, “Twenty-six people, Terra.”

“Twenty-six?” I raise my eyebrow with a bit of disbelief in my voice.

“Could be more,” Mike shrugs. “Steve, Robin, Erica, and Sam are all

coming alone.”

“Wow,” I stare at my plate and give a little laugh at the craziness I’ve been thrown into, “it’s always just been my mom and I, but I have like a pretty decent size extended family.”

Considering me for a moment, my dad takes a bit of his pancakes before saying, “I mean only three are Alex’s family, and my blood family is six of the people. I just know a lot of people who have become my chosen family, three of them are your adopted family.”

I think I choke on my food. After taking a sip of coffee since I have nothing else, I breathe out an incredulous, “What?”

“Joyce was like a second mom to me growing up, Will’s my best friend, or one of them anyways, and Jonathan married my sister Nancy. They took in your mom after her dad died.”

Jeez, I feel a headache coming. “How has this never come up before?”

Helplessly, Mike shrugs, “I really don’t know.”

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I carefully check my outfit in the mirror. Small simple silver hoops hang from my ears shown off by my hair being pulled back in a French braid. I left my makeup subtle although the eyeliner may be a bit thick for a true subtle look. My bermuda length jean shorts have flowers embroidered onto them while my black Clash t-shirt is knotted on my right hip. The finishing touches are my white Crocs and ‘11’ necklace.

Taking one last look (and a deep breath), I go down to see if I can help Alex with anything. However, before I get the chance, the doorbell rings. Inwardly, I hope it’s the Sinclairs because I actually know them... It’s my grandparents.



"Where's the birthday boy?" Karen, my grandmother, asks her son.

"Both of the boys are still down for naps before all the excitement since you are forty-five minutes early and Molly is next door playing so she doesn't get in the way right now. But there is someone here you need to meet." My dad looks at me where I quite awkwardly stand on the bottom step of the stairs. I slowly walk to meet them where I stand in front of my dad whose hands land on my shoulders.

"Mom, Dad, this is your granddaughter, Terra."

I give an awkward wave and manage to get a "Hi" out of my mouth feeling much younger than my fourteen years.

"You have eyes just like your mother," my grandfather says, surprising me and I believe my dad as well. "Molly and Tristan call us grandma and grandpa, but if you're not ready for that just call us Karen and Ted." Ted then moves into the living room taking a seat on the couch.

Karen looks shocked at her husband's reaction and not as... shall we say accepting of my existence (I know they were told ahead of time about me). She gives a tight bordering on fake smile before excusing herself to see if she can help in the kitchen.

My dad turns me around, hands still clasped on my shoulders. "Hey, look at me. That actually went pretty well. My mom is... well she's my mom. But my dad, I could never have imagined that from him, so that's good." Checking his watch, he then suggests I go get Tristan.

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By the set party time of 3 o'clock, the house is packed. I honestly have no idea how this many people fit inside the house. Apparently, though, not everyone is even here. I've met my cousins, Christopher and Catherine, who seem nice. Karen is grumbling about how she doesn't understand why her son invites all these people... out of the earshot of Mike.

Jonathan is saying how of course his mom is late running on 'Joyce time' and all while Will mutters about how that seemingly disappeared in 1984 which causes a few people to laugh.

"So, how're you handling all these people?" Chris asks me, smirking.

"Is this usual?" That prompts a laugh out of my cousin.

"Aside from Mr. and Mrs. Miller and Sam, yeah. And then Grandma, Grandpa, and Aunt Holly are only in the usual attendance when we're in Hawkins or its Uncle Mike or my mom hosting something."

I stare at him trying to wrap my head around the idea. "Really?"

"I mean Steve will bring his wife and... four... yeah four kids. Robin will bring her girlfriend and their son. And Erica will bring her husband and daughter. You see for some reason that they fail to share they all have this... this lifetime bond."

We just sit there on the landing listening to the party in our own little bubble when Chris clears his throat to say something else. "I don't actually remember her, but I knew your mom. The last time I saw her was my third birthday party."

"Wow, meanwhile I didn't know about you."

Chris gives a small laugh. "When Aunt Alex and Uncle Mike were getting married, my mom pulled a picture of your parents with me at Christmas off the mantle; she showed it to nine-year-old me and said, 'I guess I have to finally give up this photo.' The day the photos from the wedding came in the Christmas photo was replaced."

"Were your parents the ones who documented everything?"

"My dad's a professional photographer, so he took and still takes excessive amounts of pictures in my opinion."

Knocking on the door cuts through the party and interrupts our conversation. From my vantage point at the top of the stairs, I can see my dad open the door for a petite woman. They walk into the house together after she gives him a hug. Although I can't make out the words, I can make out the shock and hurt on her face. She quickly

spots me and Chris on the stairs.

“Hi, Gigi.”

“Hi, Chris,” comes the distracted reply as the woman kneels on the stairs in front of me. Gingerly, she reaches out and cups my face. She has tears in her eyes as she looks at me. “You look just like your mom,” she says with a small smile. She pulls her hand away and holds it out to me, “I’m Joyce... I took your mom in after Hop died.”

I had always known my mom had had some sort of family--in a lingering thought in the back of my head way--but now seeing the woman who took her in right in front of me, it was so real. So real, how my mom had people who cared about her and ran from them.

“I’m Terra.” I take Joyce’s hand before suggesting that we go to my room to talk.

Shutting the door behind the two of us, I gesture between the desk chair and bed. “Choose your poison.”

Joyce takes a seat in the chair leaving me to sit on the edge of my bed. I grab one of the decorative pillows to sit in my lap as if having something to hold will make this conversation easier. A conversation one might argue (probably rightly so) whose responsibility does not fall to me; however, here we are, me cleaning up one of Mom’s messes which is sadly the response to my very existence.

“You know,” I start not quite knowing what I’m going to say or meeting Joyce’s eyes, “my mom didn’t tell me a lot about her life before she had me. Details over the last fourteen years have been sparse and far between mostly consisting of the bare minimum she thought necessary.” My laugh is bitter understandable since the wound is still relatively new. “I think in the last month I’ve learned more about my mom’s childhood from my dad and Max than she ever told me.”

Joyce takes a moment to properly catch my eyes. “You have her eyes. I don’t think you look just like her, in fact I would say you look just

like Molly, but god do you ever have her eyes.”

“One of the few things my mom would say was that the best woman in the world took her in when the man she considered her dad died. She does, did, I don’t know the correct tense for this situation, but anyway I’m rambling. She does this thing where she mentions something about the family she left behind just enough for me to know she ran from something good. In a way how she does it makes me feel guilty for her choices, her choice to have sex, her choice to run, her choice to keep me away from the life she had had. But I know it is not my fault.”

Tears seem to be forming in Joyce’s eyes, yet she is determined not to let them fall. “I never knew why she ran. I didn’t even know she was gone until it was too late. I’m glad all things considered that I at least know that she is safe after all this time.”

“Do you think you could tell me what she was like at my age?”

A smile tugs at Joyce’s mouth as she launches into a tale about my mother’s first day of high school after they moved out of Hawkins.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Help you keep the story straight:

This chapter was set in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Ages:

Mike and El (1971): Terra Sara Hopper, born April 27, 1993 (14 at start)

Mike and Alex (1974): Married on September 26, 1998. Molly, born May 4, 2000 (7 at start). Tristan, born November 8, 2002 (4 at start). Ryan, born June 16, 2006 (11 m at start).

Max and Lucas (1971): Married 1993. Nadia, born December 14, 1994 (12 at the start). Olivia, born March 28, 1998 (9 at the start). Parker, born February 7, 2007 (3 m at start).

Nancy and Jonathan (1967): Married December 14, 1988. Divorced January 6, 1999. Christopher, born August 30, 1989 (17 at the start). Catherine, born

June 21, 1997 (9 at the start).

### **3. Steps Forward (aug '07)**

#### **Summary for the Chapter:**

August brings new experiences for Terra. Mike finally gets some answers, even if both him and Jane are not exactly comfortable... or maybe it will be like old times.

#### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So sorry for anyone who actually read and liked the first couple chapters. Amid a time where I should have had an abundance of time on my hands I got swept up in the last eight weeks of the school year and non writing forms of procrastination (i.e. reading other people's work and binge watching). Sadly, I have this mostly finished for a while, but was just struggling to figure out the ending and some transitions. Anyway, hope y'all enjoy!

#### **AUGUST 2007**

“Mikey!” Holly yells as soon as she sees her brother.

“Hey, Holls,” Mike grins.

“Mikey?” Terra question incredulously.

“Oh goodness, did I fail to call my dearest brother by his wonderful nickname when we met?” Holly asks with false bravo and real mischief.

Rolling her eyes, Alex smiles hugging her sister-in-law, “As always, a pleasure, Holly.”

“And just where is my hug for Miss Molly? Get yourself over her little miss,” Holly says squatting down and holding her arms out wide. Molly runs right into them with a huge grin.

“And maybe we keep it quiet because both the boys are sleeping,” Alex says.

“Hey, Terra,” Holly gives a little wave.

As they wait for their bags, Mike asks his little sister, “So, where’s Nick? Freaking out over his big day?”

“Haha very funny Mikey. First off, he has other things to attend to and secondly, the car only fits seven. And why don’t you look at that. There are seven of us.”

Terra can see her dad preparing something to say. From her limited experience around siblings, she can see a squabble about to break out despite the fact that they are both adults. “Thanks for getting us from the airport Aunt Holly.”

“My pleasure,” she replies with a grin before sticking her tongue out at her brother. Mike simply rolls his eyes.

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Terra stares out at the night shivering slightly. It may be early August, but in the night air her strapless dress wasn’t quite enough to keep her warm.

“Don’t you have a rehearsal dinner to make the rounds at?” Terra quietly asks.

“Eh,” Holly shrugs. “I already talked to all the people I like. And anyway this is a chance for me to get to know my niece.”

Terra looks up and meets her aunt’s eyes before averting her gaze back to the ground.

“Your mom, I remember her. I mean I actually don’t really remember a time before your mom was in the picture. In 1985, I was five, and the Byers moved away from little ol’ Hawkins taking Jane Hopper, the daughter of the late police chief no one knew existed with them.

Here's the thing... my brother and his friends and my sister, they all seemed to know her."

Holly knows she's piqued the girl's interest. She wonders just how much she knows about her parents, their story, since she didn't know who her father was until a few months ago.

"Both Mikey and Nance left that Thanksgiving of '85. Then the next year, Nancy went to college and after that she was never home for Thanksgiving. Christmas, though, we always had extra guests. Jane and Will and Jonathan would come back to Hawkins for Christmas break. I remember turning twelve, I have a December birthday, and I was looking forward to seeing my siblings and the Byers. I was really disappointed when your mom didn't show up. All my brother said was they broke up, never heard anything about her again."

Terra gives a quiet laugh, "Sorry, it's just my mom acted like she had a one night stand in college. Then, bam, she had me. And now, all of a sudden, my parents knew each other for years. They may have been in love for..." She sighs, "It doesn't matter. My dad has obviously moved on, and my mom has moved on. She literally left and didn't let me know my family."

"I mean in a way you're probably better off," Holly says with a shrug. Terra scoffs. "No really," her aunt presses. "Nancy started going out with Jonathan when she was seventeen; they got married when Nancy got knocked up in '88. They're divorced now. It was finalized a couple weeks after their tenth anniversary... Catherine was only a year old; I think she was some attempt to save their marriage. Not to mention, I don't think my parents ever loved each other." Holly shakes her head, taking a breath. "I thought they were going to get divorced when I graduated high school because they only stayed together for us kids. I guess maybe I was wrong and maybe they did love each other... or they stayed together for their grandkids."

"Well, I guess I didn't mess this family up as much as I thought."

"No, you really didn't," Holly says, wrapping an arm around her niece. "Let's head back inside."

"Thanks for getting me off of pointlessly wondering 'what if'... but



I'm definitely not better off."

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Terra watches as her sister walks down the aisle throwing flowers as she goes. Molly looks like a perfect little princess while Tristan, already at the altar, looks like a troublemaker. The music swells up and Holly walks down the aisle. Instantly, Terra understands why people love weddings.

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"First day of school!" Mike enthuses.

"You didn't have to fly in for this. Don't you have a first day of second grade to attend?" Terra says rolling her eyes.

"First day of high school is a big deal, kid. And you start earlier than Molly, not to mention I have to be here for work," Mike corrects.

Jane comes out of the house to join them on the porch. She hands her daughter a chalkboard. "Picture time!"

Rolling her eyes, Terra accepts the chalkboard from her mom trying not to smile.

"I'm sorry I have to work this morning, sweetheart," Jane says to Terra as she raises her camera.

"It's okay, Mom. Dad's here to take me."

With a tight smile, Jane replies, "That's right, he is."

Jane Hopper has still not adjusted to Mike Wheeler's sudden reappearance in her life after she exited his life fifteen years prior.

Nevertheless, she had allowed Terra to live with her father for a few weeks this summer and go to Holly's wedding. She had been keeping her daughter's living family from her for her entire life which had probably been wrong... okay fine she had definitely been wrong to keep Mike from Terra's life.

"We're going to meet Lucas and Max for breakfast," Mike tells her as Terra hands back her school picture board, her mother's photographer needs taken care of. Terra had thought her mom took too many photos, but after meeting Jonathan Byers she had had to reconsider that opinion.

Giving a small humm of acknowledgement, Jane replies. "As long as little miss here gets to school on time that sounds good."

"We should go, Dad," Terra urges.

"Go ahead to the car, it's unlocked."

The teenager nods leaving her parents alone.

"Can you email the pictures to me after you upload them to your computer? I think they're better quality than my phone pictures. I want to put it up on the fridge... or maybe frame it."

"Yeah. I can do that, Mike," Jane says, forcing her smile. She misses her little girl being only hers. She doesn't particularly like sharing her. Oh, she feels like a horrible mother. She let her own selfishness keep her daughter from her father and the rest of her family. Mike having moved on with his life makes her feel better though; he wouldn't have his three other kids if she hadn't left.

Mike turns on his heel just as Jane calls out. "Wait."

"Yes?" He turns around once again facing Jane.

"When do you go back to Cincinnati?"

"Saturday morning... why?"

"We should... we should have a proper talk. Terra is going to a back to school sleepover on Friday if you wanna talk... over a drink

preferably. I don't think either of us really wants to hash this all out completely sober."

Taking a deep breath, Mike runs a hand over his face. "Yeah, we should... we should probably do that." He slips out both his blackberry and iPhone. As he does, Terra honks the horn prompting Mike to give her a 'hold on a minute' gesture. "Friday looks like it works, just, uh, text me where and when to meet you, and I will text you if anything changes."

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"So, Nadia's starting seventh grade. That's an exciting year," Mike says with a nostalgic smile.

Max snorts, "Yeah, well, let's hope it's less exciting than yours was."

"You mean you don't want your daughter to have her first boyfriend?" Mike teases his friends.

"I mean if she can wait a year she might meet her future husband," Lucas jokes, giving Max a kiss.

Mike shakes his head and takes a sip of his coffee. "I don't know how you two have a twelve-year-old when you're still teenagers."

"Mike, none of us have matured much better than each other. Don't try to hold a high ground you don't possess," Max fires back.

A giggle erupts from the girls' table. In response, Parker bangs on his highchair.

"So, did Jane have anything to say this morning?" Lucas asks.

"Uh, yeah actually, she invited me to get a drink Friday night."

"What?" Mike can't determine the emotion behind Max's single word.

"Just to, like, talk about the last fifteen years she forced me to miss. She thought it would be easier over a drink."

"Makes sense," Lucas replies. "Always easier to talk about crap when you're drunk. Remember Dustin's twenty-seventh birthday?"

"I was the only one sober being a couple weeks away from my due date and all," Max laughed.

"He and Carrie had just started dating," Mike added. "I'm surprised she stayed with him."

"It's no more surprising than Alex not calling off your engagement right then and there," Lucas jokingly counters.

"Ha ha, very funny. Anyway, have any plans for the weekend?" Mike says

"Olivia has a birthday party Saturday afternoon, but other than that our only plans are watching *Psych* after the girls are in bed Friday," Max says.

"Is it bad that I sort of envy your Friday night?" Mike jokes, although it may not be completely a joke.

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Jane checks her reflection in the mirror. She has tried to dress appropriately, but it *is* a little difficult when you're not sure what is appropriate even if you called the meeting.

Damn it. Why the hell did she agree to this? Well, actually no, agree is not the right word. Why the hell did she call this meeting? To right the wrongs of her youth? That was kind of impossible being that she robbed him of the first fourteen years of her, his, *their* daughter's life. Her best guess of her motives would be it was the first step in attempting to right that. A step that needed to be taken, but the necessity of the meeting wasn't going to make it more bearable.

Seeing him made her forget why she left all those years ago. Okay, maybe not forget as much as regret. She'd dated a little in the last fifteen years; however, dating as a single mom wasn't the easiest thing in the world. Especially added to the fact of her so called

upbringing and that she had never truly dated before she was a single mom.

She grabbed her purse double checking her lipstick before walking out of her bedroom.

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“Hi.”

“Hi,” Mike parrots back as he takes the seat next to her at the bar. He orders some beer from the bartender while she sips her martini. Clearing his throat, he, albeit slightly awkwardly (there’s the Mike Wheeler she knew), says in a no nonsense tone, “I think we should just get into it, don’t you?”

“Umm, yeah, of course. Maybe you can start out just... asking some stuff you want to know and we can, you know, build up to the big stuff?”

“Yeah, yeah, that, that’ll work...”

Before he can actually ask her a question, she starts talking again, “And you know maybe I could ask you a few questions every now and then. Just because even though you not being there is my fault, see I can admit it, I still feel like I have a right to better understand what I’m letting my daughter into with you and your family.”

“I think that’s fair.” His drink gets set down in front of him and he nods his head in thanks.

“Good. Now that we’re on the same page,” she gestures for him to take the floor.

“Okay, why’d you leave, Jane?”

“I thought we were going to build up to the big ones.”

“I think we need a foundation,” he calmly counters. The two of them hold eye contact before Jane finally bows her head down to her lap.

Taking a drink of the alcohol, letting it give her psychological courage, she begins her reasoning, "Fine. So, as you probably have by now figured out, sometime in late July/early August our protection failed. We were staying at Nancy and Jonathan's for Christopher's third birthday party, right? I, um, wasn't feeling good and in the back of my head I could hear Nancy complaining about when she was pregnant, so I went to the drug store down the street and got a test. Bing bang boom there was that little positive and I freaked. We were going into our last year of college and I saw what Nancy getting pregnant did to your family. I didn't want to go into marriage before we were ready like Nancy and Jonathan. And your future was looking so bright..." trailing off she drinks the rest of the alcohol in her martini glass. "I don't know. I was scared and wanted what was best for you and wasn't thinking and left. And it turns out I was right."

Mike looks at her quizzically, in a way that brings her back to being eighteen. His expression wondering how he could ever be better off without her which was wrong because he had a family and it wasn't her and *that* was her own fault.

"You know cause Nancy and Jonathan got divorced. That probably would have been us, and then you wouldn't have your three kids..."

"Yeah," he whispers, "no use wondering 'what could have been'." And for a moment it feels like despite all he'd be losing, a part of him wishes that it would have been the two of them just like everyone thought it would be while a part of her is almost always wishing that they could have stayed in June 1985 forever.

He drains his beer and we both ask the bartender for another drink. The silence that washes over them is oddly nice despite the awkwardness. When the second round comes, Mike traces the mouth of the bottle for a second.

"How much did she weigh when she was born?" His finger continues to trace the bottle's lip and his eyes watch intently. She barely registers the question at first as she watches him, taken back to the few times they had gone out to a bar before she left.

"I don't actually know. Terra wasn't born in a hospital..."

“You weren’t alone--”

“No. No, I wasn’t,” she assures him.

“Good.” It’s a simple thing, but it makes her happy, his concern. He takes a swig of his beer.

“Yeah,” Jane lets a small smile betray her, “good.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I never actually picked a location for Holly's wedding. I will be bringing in more of the party in future chapters. I do not plan on anymore practically three months hiatus! However, life and our own personal motivations are unpredictable. The second half of this is back in Chicago.

If you're interested in keeping ages straight here you go:

Mike and El (1971): Terra Sara Hopper, born April 27, 1993 (14)

Mike and Alex (1974): Married on September 26, 1998. Molly, born May 4, 2000 (7). Tristan, born November 8, 2002 (4). Ryan, born June 16, 2006 (1 yr/14 months).

Max and Lucas (1971): Married 1993. Nadia, born December 14, 1994(12). Olivia, born March 28, 1998 (9). Parker, born February 7, 2007 (6 m).

Dustin (1971) and Carrie (1974): Married 2000. Elijah, born March 13, 2002 (5).

Nancy and Jonathan (1967): Married December 14, 1988. Divorced January 6, 1999.

Christopher, born August 30, 1989 (17). Catherine, born June 21, 1997 (10).

## 4. Reflecting (oct '07)

### Summary for the Chapter:

Halloween rolls around and the entire party's in Chicago to celebrate. Mostly focusing on the Party.

**OCTOBER 31 2007**

“Remember when you idiots were Ghostbusters?” Max says laughing as she unwraps a Reeses.

“Yeah and you scared us senseless jumping out of the bushes dressed as Micheal Myers, Mayfield,” Dustin replies with an eye roll.

Max grins. “Ah, good times. And anyways, Henderson, it’s been Sinclair for the past fourteen years. Get with the times.”

“So, remind me why you guys have a reunion every year at Halloween?” Will’s fiance, Brooke, asks.

“Well, cause Halloween is a time of bad memories. I got lost right after Halloween in ‘83 and was stuck in the hospital around the same time the following year,” Will says.

“Aw, Will the Wise, what about the good memories? Like the 33rd anniversary of me arriving in Hawkins, beating Dustin’s high scores in the arcade, and you four idiots stalking me,” Max counters.

“And yet you still married me,” Lucas says with a shit-eating grin.

“Shut up, Stalker.”

“Make me, Madmax—ow!” The statement does not earn Lucas a kiss, but a hard jab to the ribs. “Be careful, I’m pushing our son here!”

“Y’all somethin’ else,” Brooke laughs over her shoulder.

“You should get out while you can,” Dustin jokes which earns him a



glare from one Will Byers.

“Can you try not to talk my fiancé out of marrying me?” Will asks.

“I’ll take your request under consideration.”

“What’s the first Halloween you remember, Brooke?” Mike asks to change the subject.

“Oh, Halloween wasn’t a huge deal for me as a kid. I mean I just dressed up and went trick or treating like every other kid... I would have to say ‘92; I was ten and went as Wonder Woman.”

“Ugh, you’re such a baby. I was Wonder Woman in ‘92 too, but I was at a college party drinking legally and enjoying, shall we say, a make out session with my fiancé. My costume was probably a bit more revealing than yours,” a devilish smile rests on Max’s face. The boys roll their eyes while Brooke, Carrie, and Alex laugh.

“Anyone else remember what they were doing fifteen years ago? I’m pretty sure I was holed up in the library working on grad school applications eating a ton of chocolate,” Dustin says.

“While *I* was at a high school senior only party dressed as Tinkerbell having a cheap beer illegally,” Carrie laughs looking at her husband’s indignation.

“I was finally letting myself enjoy my first college party,” Alex throws out. “Gosh was that a mistake. My first and one of only three college parties attended.”

“Why? Let someone run your bases?” Max suggests with a smirk.

“God, no!”

“What were you doing, Mike?” Brooke asks, innocently.

Mike freezes for a second. He realizes that he should have been with El... Jane who would’ve been near the end of her first trimester. He found himself slipping back to calling Jane by El in his head more and more and didn’t quite know what to think of it. “I uh, actually met up with Will and Nancy and Jonathan at Joyce’s for the

weekend. I remember that year was a coveted Saturday Halloween. Chris was three and insisted on being a police officer... or more accurately he said he was the chief.” He shakes his head sadly and gives a bittersweet laugh, “Joyce tried not to, but she cried. She excused herself when he said that he wanted to be like Hopper. Nance felt horrible...”

All of them are silent. Max knows why Mike had gone out to see his nephew and sister at Halloween. He had still been so broken up about El leaving... all of them had been. It wasn't really until December that it had actually sunk in for her that her best friend was gone; she had held out hope that she would come back, but she hadn't. What if... What if...

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“I’m too old to be trick-or-treating,” Terra mumbles as she breaks apart a kit-kat.

“But you’re dressed-up,” Olivia says matter-of-factly. The nine-year-old looks up from digging around in her plastic Jack-o-lantern to look at the older girl.

“You are never too old to dress-up on Halloween; however, you do get too old to be out trick-or-treating as a trick-or-treater,” Terra declares.

“So, what were you going to get dressed up for if you weren’t going trick-or-treating?” Nadia asks.

Terra smiles as she tips her cowboy hat with one hand, being careful of Ryan who she is supporting on her hip with her other hand. “I was going to go to a costume party. Still dressed as Jessie of course.”

“Like a high school party?” Catherine questions as she adjusts her jet-black cat ears on top of her head.

“Yeah.”

“Were you going to drink? I overheard Chris say that he was going to drink at the party he’s going to when Matt was over. I’m surprised he hasn’t before, or maybe he has; that part wasn’t very clear. Our parents are absolute horrible examples of teenage behavior. Or maybe he just wanted to be better than them, but the peer pressure has become too much.”

Terra stares at her cousin in... well shock would be the best word to describe it. Beside her, Nadia laughs behind her hand, while Molly just looks confused as she tugs on her tutu.

Little Eli just stares at the girls like they’re idiots. “Of course you drink at a party! No one could go the whole length of a party without being thirsty. That’s why they always have a cooler full of water bottles, and the good parties have sodas and lemonades, too!”

“Yeah, Eli’s right!” Tristan cries in agreement with his friend. “Parties with just water are lame.”

The two boys dissolve into a conversation over what makes the best parties leaving the two pre-teen and two teen girls to shake their heads.

“Oh Ryan, they’re still in the good ole days of childhood, aren’t they?” Terra says to her brother who tries to get his Yoda ear in his mouth.

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The four of them sit around Max and Lucas’ living room, each silently nursing a beer. It was just the original party members as everyone else had gone to bed.

Terra had gone home. Well, Mike had taken her home since she has school the next morning. El--he doesn’t bother to mentally correct himself, what’s the point anyway--had been wearing a Halloween themed t-shirt and sweatpants with her hair twisted up. It took him right back to college. She had worn the same thing the three Halloweens they had spent together. In those days, Halloween had

become scary movie marathons. At least it had for the two of them. Unsurprisingly, that's what she had been doing with the elusive boyfriend of hers.

While he had been driving back to the other side of town to drop off Catherine, Nancy had called him crying. She asked if Catherine could stay with him tonight, and he would take her to school in the morning. Apparently, Chris had gone to a party, a highschool party with alcohol. Nancy who didn't sound completely sober herself begged him to help her out, so that she and Jonathan could deal with their son without their inquisitive and too smart for her own good daughter around to eavesdrop. He of course had agreed, and would have to get up early to drive his niece to the other side of Chicago where Nance lived. That's what he gets for being a good brother.

He honestly didn't know what Nancy had expected. Granted, Chris had been a good kid through highschool, and it didn't surprise him all that much that this was the most his nephew had ever drunk. Still, he remembered Nancy getting drunk at a Halloween party twenty-three years ago... Which come to think of it may have been what had her all worked up.

It had been coming up on the one-year anniversary of Barb's death. Although to most it had been the anniversary of her disappearance. Barb's parents held out such strong hope that their daughter was out there somewhere. It had been tearing Nancy apart until she snapped. She got drunk, broke up with Steve, and had to be brought home by Jonathan... Yep, that was some Halloween. Some Halloween had sucked, sucked *big* time.

"Nancy called me on my way back here," Mike finds himself saying, breaking the silence.

"Which is why you brought Catherine back here. Why'd she have you do that?" Dustin asks as he gets up for a new beer.

"Chris got drunk at a party. He didn't try driving, thank god, but it was still a first. I could tell she wasn't fully sober herself."

"Well, Halloween isn't always the easiest," Will says.

“God, I remember that last Halloween before everything changed. We were so blissfully naive. That was our last week of normalcy,” Lucas says. A small nostalgic smile graces his face.

Dustin looks a bit uneasy as he sits back down. “Do you guys ever wonder what would have happened to us if Eleven hadn’t opened the gate?” The rest of them used Jane to distance themselves from her, but Dustin had taken to using her number to do that when it was just Upside Down survivors.

“What ifs don’t really matter... Can’t change the past,” Will says.

“Just a thought experiment. Look we were dealt hell almost twenty-five years ago. You guys must have considered what our lives would have been like if we could have been normal kids. I know I have.” After opening his bottle, Dustin looks them each in the eye.

Crossing his arms, Mike stares his friend down. “Okay then smartass, if you’ve thought about it, why don’t you go first?”

“Gladly,” Dustin replies. “So, I figure the most logical way the gate wouldn’t have been opened was if Eleven never got taken from her mom. Following that logic, she lives a normal life, as normal as someone growing up with a single mom in the 70s and 80s, anyway. Don’t really know what would have become of her.”

He pauses and Lucas takes the silence to speak. “Okay, that makes sense. Definitely the easiest part to puzzle out from that approach.”

“Right,” Dustin says, motioning with his bottle. “Now for the more gray, very much theoretical, ideas. Well, I mean I would say with almost certainty that Barbra Holland would have made it to her high school graduation. Only almost because you never know, anything can happen. We know the chief had issues, I believe those would have killed him sooner or later. I don’t think the mall would have opened. Steve would still be a douche. I don’t think Nancy and Jonathan would have gotten together, but she wouldn’t have stayed with Steve.”

Mike rolls his eyes. “Are you going to get to the interesting part? Our lives?”

“Getting there, Mikey. Getting there. So, the four of us. What becomes of the four of us?”

“I don’t think our lives really change,” Lucas interjects. “I mean, yeah, of course, we would have been able to be actual kids longer. We would have less trauma. But our four lives have been relatively unaffected by it all since Jane left.”

“Really?” Dustin counters incredulously.

“We’re never going to know, but as far as I’m concerned, Mike’s life would be like it was before May. Obviously, Terra would never have been born unless Jane with her normal life ended up at college with Mike and they ended up together. Look, none of us know. For us, it would mostly be ripples, influences that wouldn’t have influenced us otherwise,” Lucas acts like it’s no big deal.

“I don’t think you and Max would be together.” Simple straightforward, Dustin raises his eyebrows.

“Whatever, Dustin,” Lucas says. They hear Parker start crying over the baby monitor which Lucas quickly turns off. His friends look at him a bit surprised. With a shrug, Lucas explains, “He’s in my room since you people took over my house, so Max is right there. You crazy people don’t need to be listening into that.”

A couple minutes pass where they drink in silence. “I wouldn’t have moved away. That would have had to do something to our lives,” Will speaks up. They don’t get a chance to restart the conversation though.

“How would a gate change so much?”

All four snap their heads to the stairs. There sitting at the top of the stairs is Elijah looking absolutely angelic.

“Hey, buddy. What are you doing awake?” Dustin tries desperately to stay calm. He’s five. He’ll probably forget all about it in the morning.

“I had to go to the bathroom.”

“Well, now we go back to bed,” Dustin says to his son. Turning to his

friends he says, "I think I should turn in too." Before whispering, "Hopefully Eli forgets all about this in the morning."

"Here's hoping," Mike says.

Raising his bottle, Will toasts, "To the past staying in the past."

"Here, here!" Lucas agrees before they all turn in for the night.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm just going to leave all the details here. lol.

Location: Chicago, IL

Mike and El (1971): Terra Sara Hopper, born April 27, 1993 (14 at start)

Mike and Alex (1974): Married on September 26, 1998. Molly, born May 4, 2000 (7). Tristan, born November 8, 2002 (4). Ryan, born June 16, 2006 (16 months).

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Christopher, born August 30, 1989 (18). Catherine, born June 21, 1997 (10).

## 5. Welcome to Hell (dec '07)

### Summary for the Chapter:

It's Christmas which means everyone heads back to Hawkins... or well Hell as some see it. Jane goes back to her hometown and meets up with old friends. In the vacant lot where their horrors came to a conclusion, the party reminisces.

### December 2007

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come?”

Jane sighs, “David, you should visit your family. It is Christmas after all, the time for family. Which is why I’m going back to Hawkins, Indiana, so that I can be with my daughter.”

“I know, but you were going to come back to Philly with me. My parents were really looking forward to seeing you again,” David says.

“And if you go to Hawkins, they won’t see either of us. Look,” taking his face into her hands she makes sure he looks at her, “in all actuality it would probably be harder if you were there. I was looking forward to spending the holidays with you, but I have to be with my daughter... and my ex, and his entire family. It’s going to be hard enough and awkward enough by myself; however, I have a feeling that if you go it would be worse.”

Laughing, David asks, “Worse?”

Her eyes roll involuntarily. “Yes, worse. Having to see my ex-boyfriend is not going to be made easier with my current boyfriend. I also don’t think seeing my adoptive mother for the first time in fifteen years with a boy is the best idea. Plus, your parents deserve to see you.”



“Okay, fine. I should see my parents, and I will. Something else I will have to do is meet this ex of yours since he is Terra’s father.”

Jane pulls back slightly, so her hands slide down to David’s shoulders while his rest on the small of her back. “I agree, but Christmas is already stressful and full of enough tension. In other words, not the right time.”

Kissing Jane’s forehead, David replies, “Of course, you’re right. I can’t wait to see what my sisters argue about this year, it’s always something.” He rolls his eyes affectionately.

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She’s not sure hate is a strong enough word for how she currently feels. Jane Hopper, number Eleven, can’t even put into words the displeasure and anger she has about being back in Hawkins, Indiana. Honestly, she doesn’t know what she is doing here... okay she knows what she’s doing here: Mike and his family come back to the horror town every Christmas because his parents still live in the house at the end of the cul-de-sac and she was not spending Christmas without Terra. But Hawkins? The place where she was tortured for twelve years, the place she lost her father... the place she met her friends who she abandoned.

She keeps driving, her daughter passed out with a book splayed open in the passenger seat. She sees the Welcome To Hawkins sign which someone has spray painted HELL onto. Looks like even if the mall fire stories have faded as the years have gone by, kids have used it to project their dislike of being in a small town.

“Hey, T, wake up.”

Her daughter groggily rubs her eyes as she slowly returns to consciousness. “Welcome to Hawkins, baby girl.” Terra looks out the window in wonder. This is where her parents grew up, where they met. It may not be glamorous, but actually being here is crazy to the

fourteen-year-old.

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“Hey, Terra,” Chris greets, “welcome to hell.” A smirk is fixed on his face as Catherine rolls her eyes.

“Christopher,” Nancy reprimands.

“I mean he’s not wrong, Nance,” Holly calls from the living room causing Karen to roll her eyes.

Nancy envelops Jane in a hug. “It’s been a long time, El. I’ve missed you.” Jane returns the hug a bit awkwardly. Terra wonders why her aunt called her mom ‘El’, but decides not to question it.

“Hey, Aunt Holls, where’s Nick?” Terra asks.

With an eye roll reminiscent of Karen’s, Holly replies, “Doing something stupid with John. Because it’s completely normal for would be brother-in-laws--if one of them hadn’t divorced himself out of the family--to hang out.”

“Micheal and them are supposed to be getting in around six,” Karen informs everyone before a squabble can break out between Holly and Nancy.

\*-----\*-----\*

Terra comes up from the basement to see both her cousins, her Aunt Holly, and Uncle Nick watching tv. “Hey, has anyone seen my mom?”

“She didn’t tell you?” Holly asks back before shoving another fistfull of popcorn into her mouth.

Rolling her eyes, Terra responds, “I wouldn’t be asking if she had.”

“Yeesh, sorry. Your mom and dad left with Nance and Jonathan when Max and Lucas came by. They’ll probably be back late, but I don’t know for sure.”

“Oh,” Terra says confused. “Do you know what they are doing?”

This time Chris speaks up, “Every year the ‘Party,’” Chris uses air quotes around the word, “and their honorary members go out and do who knows what. I guess they invited your mom cause it’s when they drink and talk about the 80’s.”

“You said you don’t know what they do,” Terra points out.

“Yeah, well, my parents always leave with alcohol, and Aunt Alex and Carrie don’t go. It’s called logic. Getting drunk and talking about when they all lived in this small town makes the most sense.”

Terra settles for the answer and decides to join in on watching the movie. She wonders how anyone could forget their kid at home as the creative defensive antics of Home Alone play out on the screen.

“Do you know where they go?” Terra finds herself asking as the credits begin to roll.

“Where the mall used to be. I only know because I followed them six years ago.” Holly says nonchalantly.

“Used to be? Did it get abandoned?”

“No,” Holly shakes her head, “it was only opened a few months in ‘85 before it burned down on the fourth of July.”

“Oh yeah, I remember you telling me about that,” stealing the last of the popcorn from the bowl on Holly’s lap, Nick joins the conversation. “Wasn’t the mayor found guilty of treason?”

Standing there in the barren lot where a bright lively mall once stood, made them all feel like teenagers again. Eleven thirty-somethings standing in an abandoned lot smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and freezing their asses off. The group's quietness was broken by Will coughing.

"Are you sure you should be smoking that?" Jonathan asks his little brother.

Will rolls his eyes, "I'll have you know, I'm thirty-six years old. I can make my own decisions."

"Yeah, well, your lungs are crap," Max says taking a drag of her cigarette.

Passing her smoke back to Steve, Robin asks, "Why did we let you children start smoking again?"

"Oh, please," Erica says from the ground, "I'm thirty-two."

"I thought you were trying to have another kid, or did you just say that to get Mom off your back?" Max backhands Lucas in the chest.

Blowing smoke out at her brother, Erica also tactfully flips him off. "One night of annual Christmas remember shit where we drink and smoke isn't going to hurt me."

"Are you sure you understand what we're doing?" Nancy takes a swig out of the vodka bottle and passes it to Mike.

Despite the somewhat somber atmosphere, Max smiles, "God, I missed getting to partake in this last year. Having to sit and watch you people was horrible. Much better to be in the midst."

"You shouldn't have even been here," Steve says.

"Like Jess wouldn't have your head if she knew what we actually got up to," Dustin counters.

"Oh, and Carrie would be thrilled," Mike adds.

"Raise your hand if your significant other would actually be okay

with what you're doing tonight," Robin sing-songs.

They all look around at each other with only Max and Lucas raising their hands. The two smile and high-five. Mike shakes his head at the two of them.

Nancy raises her hand, "Does it count if I'm divorced, single, and my ex-husband is right there." She exhibits her point by passing Jonathan the Vodka bottle since Mike had sent it back. "What about you El?" Will asks. Jane looks like a deer in the headlights. While she has been sitting here the whole time, she has hung back. She was so honored when an invite was extended to her, but she couldn't bring herself to join in. It would be easy to slip back into the familiar back and forth of the group; however, it wouldn't be right. Hearing her old nicknames though...

"My boyfriend hates smoking, and I mean I don't really smoke that much. But it's not like this is my first cigarette--"

Dustin snorts, cutting her off, "'We've all seen you smoke. May have been a decade and a half, but I definitely remember that."

"You know what I mean. I'll have an occasional one, laugh about the irony. I knew shit about the real world, but tried to get Dad to quit. Guess when I do it, I feel closer to him."

The joking atmosphere dissolves into silence. Raising his cigarette to his lips, Mike says, "To Hopper." Everyone follows suit raising their orange and white sticks to their mouth. "The man may not have seemed the most approachable, threatened me multiple times. But he protected all of us, giving his life in the end."

"Here, here," everyone says in agreement.

After an appropriate moment of silence, Lucas asks, "Anyone want to share a non shitty memory they have from the summer of '85?"

"Before I actually knew the magnitude of what was going on and got Steve and Robin begging me to help them. Shame this place had to go. I was promised free ice cream. For life."

"Maybe the only good thing to come out of this was getting out of

that agreement,” Robin smiles.

“Well,” Dustin starts, “mine was actually in the middle of the crap storm, fear of immediate death. When we were in the tunnels, I told Erica she was a nerd for liking My Little Pony.”

“Even if that was true, the fact that you, a fourteen-year-old boy knew that much about My Little Pony and didn’t even have a younger sister was sadder,” Erica says. Her smug look hasn’t changed much other than improved with age (like fine wine she once joked).

“Probably sneaking into the movies,” Will says.

“Getting shot high full of Russian drugs,” Steve takes a swig of his beer.

Max is picking at the label of her beer bottle. “Taking El shopping. That was so much fun. Mike, you got so pissed when you met us outside.”

“Oh god, I got dragged around the mall trying to find something for \$3.50!” Will groans.

“I can still picture that moment almost perfectly in my mind,” Mike says almost... wistfully.

As the group dissolves back into talking about kids and work, Max catches Jane’s eye. Seeing her old friend’s smile, one forms on Jane’s lips. She realizes that the memory was an olive branch. Despite feeling on the edge of the group, Jane knows this is the most she has felt like herself in years. She almost feels like El again. And that scares her.

\*-----\*

Joyce arrives at the Wheeler’s home and braces. Behind that door is a thirty-six-year-old woman who she hasn’t seen in years, her daughter. She doesn’t know if she’s ready.

However, she proceeds to open the door. What she finds in the living room brings tears to her eyes. Sitting on a chair is El Hopper who is stroking her daughter's hair. Joyce knew she was going to finally see El after all these years, but there she really is. Right. In. Front. Of her.

Before she knows it, Joyce is holding her daughter in her arms again. Both of them crying. El is whispering, "I'm sorry," over and over into Joyce's hair. Joyce simply holds her girl tight, cherishing the moment that she's been hoping would happen for over a decade.

And through it all, Terra feels that little pang of betrayal. Her mom kept all this, all these people away from her for years. She may have never known her family. Still, there's no use dwelling on what-ifs and could've beens, she reminds herself before she can further spiral into that rabbit hole.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I switch between Jane and El a lot in this. I associate El with who she is in the party. And hoped I kinda clarified my name usage in this chapter.

Also for anyone who cares:

Mike and El (1971): Terra Sara Hopper, born April 27, 1993 (14 at start)

Mike and Alex (1974): Married on September 26, 1998. Molly, born May 4, 2000 (7). Tristan, born November 8, 2002 (5). Ryan, born June 16, 2006 (18 months/a year and a half).

Max and Lucas (1971): Married 1993. Nadia, born December 14, 1994(13). Olivia, born March 28, 1998 (9). Parker, born February 7, 2007 (10 months).

Dustin (1971) and Carrie (1974): Married 2000. Elijah, born March 13, 2002 (5).

Nancy and Jonathan (1967): Married December 14, 1988. Divorced January 6, 1999. Christopher, born August 30, 1989 (18). Catherine, born June 21, 1997 (10).

## 6. Pink (aug '92)

### Summary for the Chapter:

Let's go back to where this all started. No, not the woods with rain pouring down in 1983, the day that strip turned pink.

### Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is a bit shorter than usual. I hope this helps answer some questions. This is the first of a few "flashback" chapters I want to do to fill in the story.

### August 1992

"Holy crap," El whispered to herself. Everything in life had been going pretty good, but now... She had just messed everything up. Well, *she* hadn't--it takes two to tango and all--so really *they* had.

She just stares at the little plus sign staring back at her. Right in her hands was a positive pregnancy test. Emotions flicker through her brain like switches being flipped. Part of her wants to be happy about this--she is carrying her and Mike's baby(!)--but mostly she is filled with dread. They still have a year left of their respective undergraduate programs; the topic of marriage has been mentioned sparsely and mostly in relation to people they know, not themselves.

She supposes that they didn't *need* to get married to have a baby together; however, she can also predict Mike wanting to get married and not doing so driving a wedge between them. While her best friend may be ready to get married, El is sure as hell not.

El thinks of Nancy who is picking up her son's third birthday cake. How Karen and Joyce had taken the news of Nancy's pregnancy. The cracks already forming in Nancy and Jonathan's marriage. Now, not even a full four years later, she's going to do the same thing to their



family. She can feel her breathing becoming irregular. God, she can't do that; she can't face her own family or Mike's. The two of them had plans, and those plans are suddenly sitting in graves.

Theoretically, she could get rid of the pregnancy, pretend nothing happened. As soon as the thought enters her mind though, El knows she wouldn't be able to go through with it.

She thinks of the bright future Mike has ahead of him. A bright future she's ruining. They're ruining. The little pink plus sign is ruining. Her choice is going to delay, if not stunt or burn, everything Mike can do after college. He would probably be better off if he had never met her nine years ago.

That's when a second idea pops into her brain. A dangerous reckless selfish idea demands her attention. What if she ran? For some reason, this seems absolutely brilliant even if the back of her brain is yelling about what it will do to everyone she knows. She has friends, family. Leaving will probably break them more than her mini-me. And yet, she commits herself to forge her own path despite every fiber of her being screaming at the stupidity in Nancy Wheeler-Byers' guest bathroom.

\*-----\*-----\*

"So, are you guys thinking about having more kids?"

"Mike, that's a rude question to ask. Would you like me asking when you plan on getting El pregnant?"

Mike looks at the kids running around with his nephew. "No need to be so crude... We haven't really talked about marriage let alone kids."

"Wait. You're telling me the two people who knew they loved each other at fourteen haven't talked about marriage?"

Helplessly, Mike shrugs. "Are you gonna answer my question, Nance?"

"If I have any more kids, I would like to no longer be in my twenties... Maybe actually plan that one," the last part is muttered into her cup of lemonade. "Thanks for coming out for Christopher's birthday. He adores his Uncle Mike."

He laughs at his sister, "I'm pretty sure he likes Uncle Will better." A little boy scream illustrates his point as Will greets Chris.

Nancy rolls her eyes, "He's allowed to adore both his uncles... You and El really haven't talked about tying the knot? I mean Max and Lucas are getting married after graduation."

"We've talked about our post-graduation plans, and getting married hasn't come up as a part of the plan."

"Do you want to marry her?" No answer. "Mike? Do you want to marry El?"

"What if it messes everything up? The two of us, we have a good thing going right now. I love her. God, I love her. I don't want to get married and ruin that."

"Then, are you guys planning to move in together?"

"Nothing definite. But, yeah we have talked about that."

Pursing her lips, Nancy looks her brother up and down. Twenty-one-years-old. It's hard for her to believe. Sometimes, she wants to imagine her little brother as that lippy twelve-year-old who snuck a girl with superpowers into her basement. But, Mike isn't that kid anymore. He's an adult who can legally smoke and drink alcohol and go to war.

"Momma!" Chris yells, running up to her and Mike.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Can we do cake?"

She checks her watch. Seeing that they are half way through the party, she says, "I think that's a great idea! I'll go have Dad get it ready, okay?"

“Okay!” And just like that her three-year-old (crap that can’t be right, but it is) is off chasing after his friends again.

As she watches Chris and the twenty or so other kids they invited eat their cake, she notices Mike, El, and Will teasing each other. She hopes they are keeping it PG, but knowing them she can only hope. They’re far enough away from the kids that they can’t be heard; however, she knows any one of those kids could run that way in a blink of an eye.

Those three grew up before they should have, faced more crap than anyone should. And, oh, that look in El’s eyes, she looks far away like she’s trying to remember every detail. Suddenly, something like dread settles in Nancy’s stomach. A storm is brewing, and Nancy hates it already.

\*-----\*

*DEAR Mike,*

*I’m sorry about this. I really am. But, I have to figure some things out... on my own. I couldn’t talk to you about it because I know I wouldn’t leave otherwise. This, what I’m doing, is better for both of us. It might not seem like that now, but in time I hope you will see it.*

*I don’t know when, if, I’ll be back. I didn’t tell anyone what I was doing, so don’t go blaming Max or Nancy or anyone else for keeping this from you. Don’t try to argue that you wouldn’t do that. I know you. I need you to continue working towards that bright future that’s waiting for you because if you don’t all this will be pointless. I can’t have this be pointless, Mike, I can’t.*

*Please, don’t look for me. I’ll be okay. This is my choice. I need you to do something other than work your butt off to finish your degree: tell everyone else. I’m really sorry about that part too. I know Max and Joyce will flip their shit. I just...*

*I love you. I love you, and that’s why I have to do this. Maybe one day, you’ll understand. Maybe one day, I’ll feel more confident in my decision.*

*Deep down I do know this isn't what I should be doing, but fear has taken over. My flight reaction has taken too deep a root for me to pay attention to the logic screaming at me.*

*I am so sorry Michael Wheeler.*

*Love,*

*JANE 'EL' HOPPER*

\*-----\*

"Hello?"

"Uh, hey Lucas is Max with you?"

"Yeah, just give me a sec..."

"What's up Wheeler?"

"Am I on speaker?"

"Now you are," Lucas says. "What's up?"

"El's gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Max asks slowly.

"She left a note at my place saying she was leaving and I needed to tell everyone else and not to lose my shit at you because she didn't tell you."

"What do you mean gone?" Max repeats.

"I mean she split without leaving any details about where she was going or why. She just said in a damn note that it was for the best and not to look for her."

The line goes quiet. Mike isn't quite sure what's happening, on the other end of the phone or in general. He has yet to really absorb the

short note... He called his two friends almost immediately in shock.

“Bullshit,” cracks over the line.

“I don’t really know...” Mike trails off and sighs. “I don’t know what happened. Everything seemed great. I, uh, called you guys almost immediately after finding the note. I don’t think--No, I know I haven’t processed this. Otherwise, well, you know.”

“She couldn’t have just left,” Max insists. He can hear that she has started crying. “We have to look for her. That’s bull if she thinks we’re just going to sit here and what? Forget about her? Is that what she wants?”

“I just... I don’t really know what to do, and thought I would go ahead and give you guys a call. I’m gonna try and get all the calls out of the way before it really sets in. You know?”

“Yeah. Yeah,” Lucas speaks up, “how about you just focus on Will, Mrs. Byers, and Nancy and Jonathan. We can pass the word onto everyone else. Okay, Mike?”

“That sounds... thanks Lucas.”

“Yeah, no problem. Talk to you later?”

“Talk to you later.” Hanging up the phone, Mike knows Max was crying on the other end; he wishes he could, and yet he feels nothing. He’s apathetic to the whole thing. A part of him thinks El took his feelings with her.

## **7. Birthdays (mar '98/'08)**

### **Summary for the Chapter:**

“Makes sense,” Lucas replies. “Always easier to talk about crap when you’re drunk. Remember Dustin’s twenty-seventh birthday?”

“I was the only one sober being a couple weeks away from my due date and all,” Max laughed.

“He and Carrie had just started dating,” Mike added. “I’m surprised she stayed with him.”

“It’s no more surprising than Alex not calling off your engagement right then and there,” Lucas jokingly counters.

--Chapter 3

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

This is later than I hoped, and also not any longer than usually. I debated this idea for so long. Thank you to anyone still reading or anyone who has decided to try it. Hope you enjoy this installment!

### **March 1998**

“Happy Birthday!” Max shouts as he opens the door.

“How far along are you again?” \*beat\* “OW! You hit me!” Dustin cries.

“You deserved it,” Max rolls her eyes and pushes her way into her friend’s apartment.

“It’s my birthday!”

“You can’t see it, but I’m flipping you off!”

Dustin stares at Lucas who is still standing in the hallway. Shrugging helplessly, Lucas says, “I mean what did you expect.”

"You guys are the first here," Dustin says closing the door behind Lucas.

"No we're not," Max replies.

"First party members," Dustin corrects. "Max, Lucas, I would like you to meet my girlfriend, Carrie. Carrie, this is Lucas and Max."

"Nice to meet you, Carrie."

"You too," she smiles.

Settling onto the couch, Max asks politely, "How long have you guys been going out?" Then, mumbles, "Damn it, I'm not going to be able to get up."

"Four months now."

Instead of replying, Max narrows in on the beer Dustin is getting out. "Are you just going to sit around here drinking while I watch?"

"Hey, it's not my fault you're knocked up--"

"Pregnant."

"*Pregnant*. That would be Lucas's."

"You're going to make me wish I had stayed at home with my three-year-old," Max groans.

"How long have you guys known each other?" Carrie asks.

"Dustin and I met when he moved to my home town in fourth grade."

"He stalked me after I moved to Hawkins in eighth grade because I beat his high score on Dig Dug."

"In my defense, you and Lucas are still together thirteen years later."

"Wait. You guys have been together for thirteen years?"

"We dated for seven, engaged for one, and married almost five," Lucas states proudly.

“Middle school sweethearts. It’s pretty annoying,” Dustin replies handing Carrie her own beer.

A knock sounds at the door.

“Saved by the bell,” Max quips.

“Henderson! Happy birthday man!” Steve shouts.

“I’m so glad you two dinguses grew out of that stupid handshake.”

“Hi, Robin.”

“Hey, kid. Happy day of celebrating your birth.”

Dustin leads the four newcomers into his apartment. Steve smiles as he looks around the room; in return Max gives him a glare for being so chirpy.

“You must be Carrie--”

“You knew Dustin was seeing someone!”

“Yes because I am his best friend.” Robin snorts as Steve turns back to Carrie. “I’m Steve, and this is my wife Jess.”

“And I’m Robin.” She points at her girlfriend, “That’s Cam.”

Cam holds out her hand. “Nice to meet you Carrie; we’ll have to indoctrinate you into the club.”

“Club?”

Jess answers, “Yeah. Mike’s girlfriend, Alex, Cam, and I have our own little club of outsiders. These people have known each other for over a decade and are bonkers.”

Bumping her hip into Robin’s, Cam speaks back up, “But ya know, we like them so what does that say about us? Is Will bringing anyone?” The last part is directed towards Dustin.

“Yeah, but he didn’t specify anything.”



“Vodka?” Robin calls from the kitchen.

“Second cabinet on the left.”

\*-----\*

“Moouooooom.”

“What, T?”

“We’re gonna be late t’ Ashley’s birthday party.”

“Terra, sweetheart, we are not going to be late.”

“But--”

“No, buts. Go sit in the living room ready to go, or else we may just be late.”

With a huff, Terra does as she’s asked while Jane gets back to finishing her makeup. She is taking her daughter to some pottery paint place. Apparently, it’s a thing that is done to celebrate kid’s birthdays. Jane knows she’ll have to throw Terra a party for her fifth birthday. God, she’ll probably screw it up. However, she is so happy that her daughter gets these experiences. She never went to a birthday party (or really knew what a birthday even was) until she was thirteen, and most of the parties she went through were normal group hangouts except with cake.

Blinking back tears, Jane quickly goes through her closet. If she hadn’t been so hasty, so stupid, she would be going out with her friends to celebrate Dustin’s twenty-seventh birthday tonight. These events rolling around always make her want to go back, see her friends again. But she made her choice; it would be wrong to barge back into their lives.

She wonders if Max and Lucas have any kids, or if Dustin’s found anyone. She wonders if Will is happy, and what kind of number her thoughtless choices, permanent choices, had had on Mike.

The clock catches her eye. Damn, she needs to leave. Swiftly, Jane twists up her hair and grabs her purse so that she can walk out of her bedroom.

“Okay, Little Miss. Let’s get going. Got the present?”

“Uh huh.”

“Good.”

“Are you gonna stay?”

“Yeah, you got a problem?”

“Parents don’ stay.”

“Too bad.”

“MOM!”

“We could always stay here.”

“It would be great to have you watching me,” Terra says rushing out the door.

“That’s what I thought,” Jane mumbles, locking the apartment door.

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“All of you are absolutely hammered,” Max declares, twisting the cap onto her water bottle.

“No, that doesn’t sound right,” Will says.

“Will, do you even know what’s in that solo cup of yours?” she asks back.

“Uh,” he leans his head onto his boyfriend’s shoulder, “you say that like this is some high school or college party.”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

"I mean I don't think I could ever be as out of it as when Russians kidnapped me and pumped me full of drugs," Robin says flippantly.

Max leans her head back onto the couch. The lack of reactions proves her point wonderfully.

"You know what," Mike announces, "we should play never have I ever."

"Drinking game or just putin' down your fingers?" Jack, Will's boyfriend, asks.

"What harm would a little more drinking do?" Dustin challenges.

Rolling her eyes, Max grumbles, "I should've stayed home with Nadia."

"I'll start as the birthday boy. Never have I ever been presumed dead."

"Screw you, Dustin," Will says before taking a drink.

"Okay, my turn," Mike says. "Never have I ever gotten anyone pregnant."

Steve and Lucas air clink their beer bottles.

"Uh," Alex looks around the circle, "never have I ever... lived in Hawkins, Indiana."

Half the group groans. Then, in unison and a single motion, the six Hawkins kids take their drink.

"Good one," Max nods. Alex smiles back shyly.

"Never have I ever worked at Scoops Ahoy," Cam smirks at her girlfriend.

"Mean," Robin grumbles. "Okay, never have I ever had adopted six middle schoolers."

"Are you people trying to make me black out?" Steve asks. "Shoot, I

think I need another if I'm gonna keep playin'."

"Here," Mike pushes a can across the table.

Steve grimaces at the can briefly before popping the tab. "Never have I ever snuck into a movie theater."

"Come on that shouldn't count; you aided the sneaking," Lucas whines.

"Max can be the judge," Steve shoots back.

"Drink up, Stalker."

"Uh, let's see," Jess rolls her beer bottle between her hands. She has been lucky that 'The Party' has mostly been picking on each other. "Well, oh! Never have I ever smoked a cigarette." Everyone but Alex downs a sip.

"Never have I ever been engaged," Will says.

"If you'd agreed to go to the courthouse when I asked, I wouldn't be taking this drink," Lucas says to Max; she smacks him upside the head as Mike, Alex, Steve, and Jess drink.

For his turn Jack says, "Never have I ever been arrested."

They all look at each other waiting for someone to admit to it. Dustin looks between Steve and Robin.

"I don't... I think we've all managed to not be arrested," Steve speaks up.

"I think that's a miracle," Robin responds. "Yet, yeah, I can't think of anything."

Confused at the whole game, Carrie whispers, "Is it bad that your friends think they should have been arrested?" Dustin just shrugs.

"Let's see," Lucas leans his head back onto the couch cushion. "Max, any ideas?"

“I’m not going to be your co-conspirator, Stalker.”

“Fine, fine... Okay, never have I ever... Never have I ever rescued a strange girl from the rain,” he smirked wickedly.

Silence falls over the room as Mike takes his drink without breaking eye contact. Robin backhands Steve across the chest for letting out a low whistle.

Looking like a deer in the headlights, Carrie takes her turn. “Um, what about, never have I ever shoplifted.”

Lucas brings his bottle to his lips, the whole room looking at him. “I can’t be the only one!”

“What did you take?” Carrie asks, leaning into the makeshift circle.

“Fireworks.”

“Fireworks?” Jack repeats back incredulously.

“Fourth of July, the store was abandoned. Seriously, Mike? Will? You guys aren’t gonna own up?”

Mike throws his hands up, “I have nothing to own up to; it was mostly you, Nancy and Jonathan. Also, you forgot to mention that damn New Coke you drank.”

Lucas turns to Will who sighs. “Fine, I’ll admit to my part of carrying out fireworks. Max should take a drink of her water in solidarity.”

“Nah, I think I’ll stick with Wheeler’s excuse of technical indirect involvement.”

Alex reaches over Mike to tap Dustin’s knee. “Where were you in all this?”

“Watching *Back to the Future* with Erica while Steve and Robin ran off high.”

“Hey,” Robin says, “it wasn’t our fault, and you know it. If anything, it was your fault.”

“And it turned out to be important not to mention pretty good cause. So. Anyway, it’s back to me. Never have I ever driven without a license or illegally or whatever.”

While Will, Cami, Robin, Carrie, and Jack drink, Steve shakes his head remarking, “Sadly, the person who should be drinking the most for this one is the one who can’t.”

Max smiles widely, “I told you, Zoomer.”

“What are you talking about?” Jess asks.

“When I was thirteen, Steve got knocked out. I took my step-brother’s Camaro and drove , Lucas, Dustin, Mike, and an unconscious Steve.”

“Awe, and you took him to the hospital.”

“Sure, why not?”

“Okay, I’m going back to picking on people,” Mike says. “Never have I ever stalked a girl.”

“Hey, don’t talk shade about that when I married the girl,” Lucas laughs.

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10 Years Later:

“How are you enjoying your spring break?” Mike asks his eldest.

In a non answer, Terra fires back, “Do you have Eggos?”

“Oh, uh no. You like Eggos?”

Terra raises an unimpressed eyebrow, “Yeah, Mom always has them in the house. I eat them for breakfast most mornings... Mom isn’t exactly the best cook if you didn’t know.”

Laughing a bit awkwardly, Mike replies, “I definitely remember that.

Sorry, I should have asked about what food you wanted here.”

“No, it’s fine. I can eat whatever Alex makes like I usually do when I’m here.”

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of it. When we were teens, your mom lived off of Eggos. Her dad would make her these... oh wait what did he call them...” Mike snaps emphatically, “Triple Decker Eggo Extravaganza.”

“Mom’s never told me that,” she says, pouring a glass of orange juice.

Mike watches as his daughter goes to the table and takes out the international news section. As she reads, her brow furrows in concentration. It’s really cute, he thinks. Can he call her cute, or is it weird?

Shaking his head, Mike speaks up, “And you’re good to watch Molly, Tristan, and Ryan while we go out to celebrate Dustin’s birthday.”

“Totally. Why are people coming here though?”

“Carrie and Dustin are spending a few days in New York. This is on the way, plus we’re the only ones who aren’t sending the kids to the grandparents for the break.”

“Gotcha.”

“Hey, you two,” Alex chirps. “How are you, Terra? You got in kind of late last night.”

“I’m good.”

“Anything interesting happening up in Chicago?”

Terra seems to consider the question for a second. “I went to my friend Ashley’s birthday party before coming. It was kind of boring though; all anyone wanted to do is talk about boys.”

Alex raises an eyebrow at Mike who just gives a ‘what are you looking at me for gesture.’ She sighs, and tells her step-daughter, “Well, it’s better than when they get to the age where they celebrate

by getting sloppy drunk. Remember, ten years ago?”

Mike rolls his eyes with a scoff, “Max was pissed--”

“Hey, little ears live in this house!” Alex exclaims to which Terra laughs.

“She was so *annoyed* . Everyone got so drunk while she just sat on the sofa watching.”

“Honestly, not surprised Jess and Cami have elected to stay home. If I wasn’t going to support Carrie, I would just stay with the kids.”

“You guys are going to have a designated driver, right?” Terra asks.

“First, we,” Mike gestures between him and his wife, “are the adults. Second, we’re taking a cab, so there.”

“Oh, Dad,” Terra smiles going back to the paper.



## 8. Oh Baby

### Notes for the Chapter:

I would like to apologize to anyone who had been enjoying this story. I have had this chapter written for a while, but I had hoped to have a couple other sections. I had postponed uploading until I figured them out, but I have decided to just release what I have written.

Thank you to anyone who decides to read.

### Baby

There's something special about the first time you hold your baby whether it's your first or third. Ask parents about that moment. Most people will say they fell absolutely in love with that little person as soon as they laid their eyes on them. For the mother, the last however many hours of pain, fall away because they have this perfect little person. All the months of discomfort are worth it.

April 27, 1993

She's been alone. Since August, it's been her and her baby against the world. Now, hearing *her* baby cry, holding *her* baby against her chest, everything is worth it. She has a little girl that she doesn't have to share with anyone else. This perfect little person is all hers. She still couldn't believe she made this. Even with her baby girl resting on her chest grabbing her pointer finger, she was amazed.

The midwife she'd found is still bustling around. She notices the older woman cleaning up out of the corner of her eyes.

"Do you have a name picked out, Jane?"

Without lifting her eyes from the bundle in her arms (she can't take

her eyes off it, *her* ), Jane answers, "Terra. Terra Sara Hopper."

"That's very pretty."

"My mother's name was Terry; she didn't get to raise me. I think it's a nice... hom--homage."

"I think so too. Anything that special about the middle name?"

"My adoptive father, he had his own daughter before me, but she died. Her name was Sara."

"It's very sweet of you to honor her," Lisa, her midwife, says, placing a hand on Jane's shoulder.

In her head, she knows the polite thing to do is acknowledge Lisa; however, she is still enthralled by Terra.

Lisa gives a tickling laugh Jane had gotten used to in her prenatal appointments. "This little Miss has gotten a hold of your heart." Jane wants to say something, maybe apologize, but Lisa just keeps talking. "Don't worry. This is my favorite part: seeing the mother become entranced with the tiny human they've created. I'll leave you two to get better aquatinted." Smiling, Lisa sweeps out of the small make-shift delivery room.

"Hi," Jane whispers to Terra. Murky blue eyes blink lazily back at her. "I'm your mom... It's just you and me, baby girl, *Terra* --that's your name. I'm sorry about that, you would've had a great family. But I'm glad that I won't have to share you; I can't imagine what I would do if I couldn't keep you to myself. Don't worry. I'm going to try my damndest to be the best mother. I am going to love you so much. I already do. However, I know that love is just going to grow as you grow. Let's not think about that yet... Terra, it's going to be me and you against the world, and I hope I do it right." She presses a lingering kiss to Terra's forehead.

The right thing to do would be to contact Mike. Which she could do easily enough. And while that would be the right thing to do, there were two reasons why she won't. 1. All the selfish half-thought out reasons that she ran away in the first place. 2. The even more selfish

fact that looking at her precious baby girl, the only thing she's had over the last eight months, she doesn't know how in the world she would be able to share her with anyone else.

She marvels at how Nancy had passed around Christopher... Sweet little Chris, the first baby she ever held, the first baby she ever saw in person, her nephew. She thought he was so small and innocent and adorable. Though every thought she had had about that baby boy paled to what she thought about her daughter, her perfect baby girl.

August 30, 1989

"They're all so tiny," El whispers from her spot on Mike's right.

"Which one's Christopher?" Will asks from Mike's other side.

"Uh," Mike studies the bassinets through the window, "Oh! That one." He points to one of the babies fixed with a light blue cap. "The name card says Christopher James Byers."

Her eyes roaming the rows of newborns, El declares, "I think our nephew is the cutest one."

This prompts both of her companions to laugh. "Well, I think you're a bit biased," Mike teases. "But for clarity's sake, was that a general declaration?"

"Rolling her eyes, El responds, "No, course not. Just in this particular nursery... I think I want one."

"A baby?"

El nods.

Laughing at both his sister's declaration and his friend's face, Will manages to get out, "I don't think they take kindly to people taking other people's children."

The look on El's face is of absolute indignation; she of all people would know *that* . "I don't want to take one. I want my own, William. Not now, but someday."

Mike looks relieved by this clarification. "I'm glad we got to be here before going off to school. Meet our future D&D apprentice."

Nodding, Will concurs, "Yeah, we're lucky we got late start dates and Chris decided to come on time."

"Nancy won't like that you are already calling him Chris, short for Christopher." El runs a hand through her hair while looking away from the nursery.

"She knows his name will be shortened. I don't see--"

"I'm not saying--"

"Hey, guys," Mike interrupts the squabbling siblings. Two heads simultaneously snap towards him. "A nurse is taking Christopher. We should go see Nancy. Maybe she'll actually let us hold her baby."

"I think she will. Even if just for Jonathan's sake."

"Will, she just pushed a *baby* out of her *body* . I don't see my sister doing anything for anyone's sake."

"Well, she actually likes me and El so maybe she just won't let *you* hold Chris, Michael."

The three go silent again as they start walking to Nancy's room. With a little shiver, El murmurs, "I don't like hospitals."

"Nancy wanted a home birth, but Mom wouldn't hear of it. Something about practicality and safety and dragging Nancy's ass into a hospital bed."

"I definitely wouldn't blame Nancy," Will agrees, also holding a wariness of hospitals.

Arriving at door 1516, El knocks three times. Joyce is the one who opens the door holding a finger to her lips. The gesture makes Will

feel more like nine than eighteen. Nancy looks up from Christopher who is in her arms to the three people coming in and smiles softly.

“Hi, guys. You wanna meet your nephew?” Nancy is met with three nods. “Here, all three of you can have a turn holding him. Christopher should properly meet his aunt and uncles before they leave to get their education...El, would you like to go first?”

“Really, me?”

“Yeah. Jon, can you get El that chair and bring it next to the bed.”

“Course... Here, El sit here, Nancy will make sure you’re comfortable with Christopher.”

El sits down almost robotically giving a little nod of understanding. Suddenly, a weight is deposited in her arms. Looking down, she sees the small sleeping face of her nephew. Nancy is walking her through the best way to support him. And while she knows her body is adjusting, she has also tuned the world out. Chris is heavier than she expected, but still seems so small. She supposes that she might be watching the newborn with reverence. Out of all the things she’s seen in her life, in this moment, El decides that birth is the most wonderful miracle in the world.

December 15, 1994

Mike bounces his knee up and down, up and down. The waiting room is cool, he slips his hands into his jacket pockets.

“God, Mike, would you stop that,” Dustin hisses across from him.

“I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re bouncing your leg, *incessantly* .”

“ Can you guys be quiet?” Erica sighs, sitting with a seat between her and Dustin.

“Dustin started it,” Mike grumbles. Will is seated on his right reading, or trying to anyway; Mike knows he hasn’t turned a page in a good ten minutes.

Steve and his fiancée, Jess, rush in with Nancy and Jonathan hot on their heels. In Jonathan’s arms, Christopher is fast asleep despite the commotion. All four of them look around before their eyes land on the Party. Even though it’s only 11:30 pm, they look disoriented.

“Hey,” Steve says softly, coming to put his hand on Dustin’s shoulder, “what’s the news?”

“They have a baby girl.” Erica looks up and meets Steve’s eyes. “A healthy baby girl.”

“That’s the good news I’m guessing,” Nancy says.

“Max hemorrhaged. They’re doing everything they can, but...” Will’s eyes stay firmly on his book like an anchor.

“Well, what’s everyone been up to?” Seven incredulous pair of eyes including his fiancée turn on Steve. “Look, there’s nothing to grieve yet. There is a birth to celebrate. So all and all, we might as well catch up while we wait for more news.”

Finally looking up, Will sighs, “I have been on so many dates in the last six months. At least it feels that way because I’ve barely made it to two dates with any of them. A couple guys, a couple girls, I struck out on all of them.”

“Yeah,” Dustin agrees, “the dating game sucks ass.”

“Glad to be out of that.” Steve grins; he lowers his voice slightly, “What about you Mike?”

Mike rubs his neck subconsciously, “I, um, I met this girl. Her name is Alex, and we were supposed to go out Saturday. Hopefully, she’ll let me reschedule to next year.”

In response, Erica groans, “Don’t start with the see you next year jokes yet.”

“Chris is really enjoying kindergarten,” Jonathan murmurs. Nancy reaches out to rub her little boy’s back.

“We finally set a wedding date,” Jess says, joining the conversation. However, that turns out to be the end of the conversation.

Lucas comes running out to the waiting room, a soft smile adorning his face. “She’s stabilized. Max is going to be okay. We’re going to get to raise our little girl together just like we planned. Everything is fine, almost perfect even.” He falls into his sister’s embrace with tears starting to roll down his face.

The entire group gets up and goes to congratulate the new dad.

“Does this baby girl have a name?” Dustin teases his friend.

Reaching up to wipe his tears, Lucas laughs lightly, “Uh, yeah, yeah. I hope all of you will make your way to the nursery at some point tonight to meet, or well see, Nadia Jane Sinclair.”

When he finally makes it to the nursery to see his friends’ daughter, Mike almost cries. Bringing this little pink bundle into the world almost killed Max. While the two of them had their differences in the beginning, they had grown to respect each other, had become friends over the years. And then, and then, they had to name their baby after *her* . *Her* who had saved them as kids becoming teenagers and then suddenly wrecked them as they were truly becoming adults.

“Welcome to the Party, Nadia Jane,” Mike whispers into the glass. “Welcome to the Party.”

May 5, 2000

“Hey.”

“Hey.” Max’s eyes are fixed in front of her.

“I’m glad you and Lucas could come.” He settles next to her looking through the large window at all the babies.

She still doesn’t look at him, but she does smile, “We wouldn’t have missed this for the world, Mike. Conveniently, we barely had to go out of our way to drop Nadia and Livie with their grandparents.” She plays with the hem of her shirt. “ I’m just glad it wasn’t as life-and-death as when we became parents. Which by the way, how does it feel now that it’s all real?”

“Surreal? I mean for thirty-four weeks I loved this thing that turned into a baby girl whose kicks I could feel. And now, Little Miss Molly is really here and any fear I had for thirty-four weeks just became a lot more real.”

“Here’s the thing that only your brutally honest friends who already have kids can tell you: You are not going to know what the crap you are doing, but you are going to learn. And let me tell you, it’s not going to matter because you are going to love them so much, and they will love you right back making everything worth it.”

He nods. “Thanks Max.”

“Yeah, yeah, Wheeler.”

“ *So ...*”

“ *So ...*” she echoes right back to him.

“What’s your deal? You were obviously thinking about something, looking at the nursery, when I found you.”

“Maybe I just wanted to look at Molly.”

“Nah, you were thinking pretty hard for someone just looking at a newborn, Mayfield.”

Under her breath, Max huffs, “It’s Sinclair, and you know it.” She bites her lip before glancing over at him. “I’m pregnant.”



“Does Lucas know?” Mike practically sputters.

Max rolls her eyes, and somehow it takes Mike back a decade. Back to the summer after freshman year of college, Max and El were both constantly rolling their eyes at all of them it seemed like. Robin was lamenting to the two of them about finding a job. Nancy always had Christopher on her hip whenever he wasn't crawling around as fast as he could. Erica had somehow convinced the Party to let her DM a game of Dungeons and Dragons. When asked about it, she had simply said that all the guys at Hawkins High were lame. Max and El both longingly snuck peeks at Chris when they thought no one was looking. El would joke, sometimes taking a more serious tone, about their future kids...

Why was he thinking about the girl who left him on the happiest day of his life?

“Course dingus. I'm not going to tell you something like that without having told my husband.” Mike realized that he hadn't spaced out while Max answered. All that memory flashed through his mind in a single second. “We got to hear the heartbeat yesterday; we're on track for another December baby. The girls will be 2 and 6 which is a nice age difference I think. We'll probably have to take better protection measures after this one.” Her laugh is obviously forced.

“But,” he prompts, their eyes locking.

“The doctor said everything looked fine. Practically perfect even. Yet I-I can't shake this bad feeling.”

Slinging an arm around Max's shoulder, he says, “I bet everything will be just fine like the doctor said. Now would you like to hold your goddaughter.”

“What?”

“I mean unless with a third on the way--”

“No way. You do not get to take this away from me!”

“You and Lucas, you guys know what you're doing with two of your own girls, so Alex and I thought you'd be good godparents.”

They fall into step walking back to Alex's hospital room. "Can you believe you are basically entrusting that thirteen-year-old girl you wouldn't let in your boys club with your daughter if you die?"

He jokingly pushes her slightly away as she dissolves into lighthearted laughter. "Oh, shut up Mayfield."